

CHAPTER 3

CONSIDERATIONS IN PLANNING RISK COMMUNICATIONS

Successfully communicating information about flood risk requires some planning. The chief matters to be considered are:

- ☐ The intended audience for the communication.
- ☐ The means of communicating information.
- ☐ How to present the information.
- ☐ Testing for effectiveness.

IDENTIFYING THE AUDIENCE

Community officials and members of the public tend to specialize in selected issues. Some may be interested and active in tax-related issues, some in historical preservation, etc. In order to attract the involvement of a significant share of a community in solving a flood problem, it may be necessary to employ multiple approaches that address the risk with respect to flooding's potential impact on several topics of interest. The same applies to providing information on a

proposed project. A presentation designed to explain a proposed project to an environmentally oriented group is not likely to answer many of the questions that would be in the minds of, for instance, those interested primarily in economic development.

MEANS OF COMMUNICATING

There are numerous channels that can be used for communicating information about flood risk. Not all of them are usually suitable for any particular informational effort but frequently several are. The following are the most familiar of the channels that are generally suitable for one or another of the types of informational programs carried out by the Corps of Engineers.

- ☐ Mass media; e.g., radio, television, and newspapers.
- ☐ Public hearings and informational meetings.
- ☐ Reports and report summaries.
- ☐ Audio-visual materials for use by others; e.g., photographs, slide sets, and audiotapes.
- ☐ Exhibits and displays, information racks, closed-circuit television showings, traveling exhibits.
- ☐ Leaflets, manuals, handbooks, reference guides, brochures, booklets and books.
- ☐ Inserts and enclosures in other forms of communication; e.g., magazines, books and utility bills.

- ☐ Participation in meetings, seminars and conferences.
- ☐ Provision of speakers for local organizations.
- ☐ Telephone answering services, i.e., recorded messages.
- ☐ Folk network ("the grapevine", the family, community leaders, community groups, religious organizations, etc.)

PRESENTING THE INFORMATION

Motivating action is an uphill battle. However, psychologists,

social scientists

and others have made a number of suggestions

concerning how to maximize the chance of success.



Timing Risk Communications

People are faced with large amounts of information, a considerable amount of which is risk-related. Most information is discarded without much consideration unless the topic is of interest at the time. Research indicates, for example, that as little as five percent of direct mail materials are read. Flood-related information is most likely to be considered and acted on in the period immediately after a flood. In view of this, it may be useful in some cases to have risk communication packages stockpiled so that they can be distributed quickly after a flood.

Preferred Ways of Receiving Information

People generally state that they prefer receiving risk-related information in written form so as to be able to keep it for reference. However, within a few months of being given such information, a large percentage of people cannot recall its receipt. Research indicates that

“Risk communication should involve a two-way dialog...”

there is little actual difference in effectiveness between

brochures, radio and television. When television is used, one study has found that the use of purchased time is much more effective than reliance on public service

14 announcements.

Effectiveness in Delivering Information

For maximum effectiveness, risk communications should involve a two-way dialog that enables identifying and addressing the actual concerns of the audience and ensuring the message is explained in understandable terms. Face-to-face contact appears to be the most effective technique of communicating risk information.



Length of Message

Evidence shows that people only retain a small part of lengthy messages concerning risk. It is a waste to provide more information about a flood problem or a project than the audience is interested in having.

Use of Fear as Motivator

Studies have suggested that it is not very effective to rely on fear as a motivator. While such attempts may sometimes be successful, the duration of their impact is usually short. In some cases, the use of fear may have unexpected results that are the reverse of the ones desired. It is more effective to use a positive type of motivation. Research also indicates that modest use of fear as a motivator is as effective as a high level of fear.

Comparison of Risks

It is generally not effective to compare flood risk with other types of risks. Perceptions of risks and decisions to take action to reduce a risk are affected by the characteristics of hazards such as uncertainty, controllability, catastrophic potential, and others that are not comparable between hazards.

Description of Small Probabilities

The manner of presenting flood probability data is very important. Small flood probabilities are likely to be equated with zero risk. The effectiveness of communications can be improved if the flood probability is stated in terms of a "lifetime probability" or in another aggregated form that yields a number or ratio of a magnitude that is easy to understand and appreciate. For example, flood probabilities might be stated in terms of a decade or over the life of a typical home mortgage.

Need for Evaluating Risk Communication Products

Many programs intended to inform people about floods and motivate action fail because they do not address the concerns of the

intended audience or for other reasons. In order to improve their chance of success, *"Many programs fail because they do not address the concerns of the...audience."*

large scale informational programs should include provisions for determining the nature and importance of such concerns and for testing whether the approaches and tools that are to be used deal effectively with them.